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ABSTRACT

Traditional female status, roles, and aspirations and changes that have occurred in American society are traced. While women were barred from colleges and universities in the 1800's, they now account for more than 50 percent of college students. It is projected that by the year 2000, women will represent an even larger percentage of the college population, and that if this change is accompanied by a rise in aspirations, there will be consequences for traditional female jobs. It is suggested that labor participation rates for females will probably continue to rise since there are more single women, more working couples, smaller families with fewer demands at home, inflation, and increased opportunities for women to use their skills in the work force. Both opportunities and aspirations will probably increase as equal rights legislation has its effect, as the predicted decline in high school graduates affects both college enrollment and the demand for skilled workers, as female role models become even more widely visible, and as the collective consciousness of the nation grows in its acceptance of women as leaders. The state can play a role in this process by providing financial aid in the form of grants and can provide loan forgiveness to those who take employment in certain fields, in certain settings, for certain periods of time. (SW)

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The Evolution of Roles and Aspirations:

Burgeoning Choices for Females

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Before examining the idea that new career choices are emerging for women, let us be certain we have common understandings about terms. "Burgeoning choices" refers both to new jobs or roles (for example, affirmative action officers and art therapists) and to changing jobs and roles (obstetricians doing general practice work, various clinical specialties evolving from more general health service roles, etc.). This evolution of roles reflects the process of professionalization, a term which is well known to those of you in the social sciences.

Burgeoning choices means new life chances. Nursing became a new life chance for women in 1870; now there are scores of health care specialties. Not long ago there were only physicians and nurses. With increased career choices available to women, it is likely that more of them will continue to enter the labor market, and that their aspirations will continue to rise. Therefore, more of them will probably try to avoid traditionally female jobs if they can, and some already in those jobs will try to leave them. The reasons for this are known: a desire for increased pay, more control over hours of work, better work environments, and greater opportunities for personal and professional growth.

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My attention today is on females, which suggests to me that we should look first at traditional female status, roles, and aspirations. As recently as the 19th century in this country, women were thought to have smaller brains, and therefore to be inferior to men. And since their wombs were supposed to draw energy from their brains, it was thought that they would divert needed strength from their primary function, child bearing, if they attempted more intellectual pursuits. This was a major argument against the admission of women to colleges and universities in the 1800's.

Earlier, major thinkers in eras as diverse as Virgil's and Voltaire's commented on women in society. According to Virgil, "A woman is always a fickle, unstable thing." Voltaire said, "Very learned women are to be found, in the same manner as female warriors; but they are seldom or never inventors." Even today, one need only look at advertisements in mass market media to see that women are still seen as nurturers and that men are seen as powerful and authoritative. The respective roles of men and women are not seen much differently in certain congressional debates, either.

In some other countries the situation is even worse. Afterall, it was only last year that Egypt's Anwar Sadat made radical changes -- while parliament was not in session -- in laws that govern the rights of women. His actions resulted in an increase in the number of women in Parliament and as heads of city councils. He also revised the divorce

rules. Now, first wives have the right of disapproval over second wives in bigamous arrangements, and for the first time, husbands are obliged to notify a former wife about their divorce.

Historically, women have been expected to enter low level positions in service industries, not management or administrative positions; their domain was seen to be the affective and caring occupations, in positions which required little in the way of socially recognized "self reliance." As a result, several positions are known as female occupations: elementary school teaching, clerical work, office machine operation, secretarial positions, religious education work, telephone switchboard operation, and cash register duties. These are, typically, jobs which do not require high levels of education and which are, generally, of low status.

But there have been changes in the status and roles of women in American society which we should recognize. One change is that more women are going to college. According to a recent Carnegie Council report, women accounted for 37% of college enrollments in 1960 and now account for more than 50%. By the year 2000, they will represent an even larger percentage. This change will, if accompanied by a rise in aspirations, have consequences for traditional female jobs, many of which have high demands for new workers. For example, new growth is expected in these positions by the mid-eighties:

pre-school/kindergarten teachers, plus 25%; dancers, plus, 22%; religious education workers, plus 11%; librarians, plus 11%; social workers, plus 30%; legal secretaries, plus 50%; medical secretaries,

plus 80%; bookkeepers, plus 28%; clerical workers, plus 29%; practical nurses, plus 55%; registered nurses, plus 35%; and lab technologists plus 43%. Stenographers, by contrast, are listed at minus 22%.¹

One way to assess the future supply of workers for these positions and others is to examine the fields of study women are selecting in colleges and compare their aspirations now to ten years ago. Do women still study literature, art, education, and home-economics, while men study law, politics and science? For each of the past fifteen years or so, Alexander Astin, formerly at the American Council on Education and now at UCLA, has surveyed the attitudes and backgrounds of several hundred thousand freshmen.² His findings in 1979 included the following:

- women more than men go to college to "learn more about things" and to "gain a general education."
- men more than women "go to college to make more money."
- men have high aspirations for advanced degrees but women's aspirations have increased dramatically over the past ten years. Female aspirations for the Ph.D. have grown by 30% over this period; for the M.D., 300%; for the doctor of jurisprudence, 900%; for the bachelor of divinity degree, 200%.

During this period, the number of women planning to study literature has dropped 25%, but the enrollment of women in business programs has increased 100%. Enrollments of women in education are down 30%, while the number of women in engineering is up 500%.

It is true, of course, that most of these dramatic increases are based on small numbers. There weren't very many women in engineering to begin with, so while an increase of 500% is dramatic in what it says, it does not result in large numbers of women engineers. But it is a growing percentage and reflects how women's objectives or goals have changed, at least according to this comparison of freshman women in 1969 and in 1979.

Change, however, is not limited to fields of study. Between 1969 and 1979, there have been dramatic changes in responses to these statements about life goals: "I want to be an authority in my field," from 54% to 71%; "I want to obtain recognition from my peers," from 35% to 50%; "I want to have administrative responsibilities," from 16% to 35%; "I want to be well off financially," from 32% to 57%; "I want to make theoretical contributions to science," from 6% to 11%. There have also been changes in the other direction: "I want to go to college to develop a philosophy of life," from 86% to 55%; "My objective is to raise a family," from 78% to 65%. In both cases, the percentages are now closer to men's responses than they were ten years ago.

Well, what are the consequences of all this? And not just for families, schooling, government, and employment in general, but on the choices available to women and on occupations high on the list of public policy concerns, like health care. Labor participation rates for females will in all likelihood continue to rise for reasons we can guess: more single women, more working couples, smaller families with

fewer demands at home, inflation, and increased opportunities for women to use their skills in the work force. Both opportunities and aspirations will probably increase as equal rights legislation has its effect, as the predicted decline in high school graduates affects both college enrollment and the demand for skilled workers, as female role models become even more widely visible, and as the collective consciousness of the nation grows in its acceptance of women as leaders.

But what about public policy towards traditionally female job categories in which the supply of positions seems to be greater than the number of people willing to work in them? Certain health care positions in city hospitals come to mind.

My view is that the state has a limited role to play, but that it does have an important role. It can provide financial aid in the form of grants which both make access to training possible and encourages enrollments in certain programs, and it can provide loan forgiveness to those who take employment in certain fields, in certain settings, for certain periods of time. But even these supports -- which supplement many other forms of financial subsidy and moral encouragement -- will be less effective than they might otherwise be if working conditions and financial returns to workers are not sufficient to attract the highly trained. Above some minimal levels mandated by law, these are the responsibility of employers, many of whom are represented here today.

This, however, is not the topic of my talk. My job has been to sketch a landscape of the opportunities that are before us, and before women. It is a scene that is shaped by many forces -- citizens concerned with justice, government action, private sector needs -- and it will continue to change and to grow; it may even advance.

The future is in many ways bright. The changes in demography about which many complain will probably help cause a period of unprecedented opportunities for well trained women, and men. It is up to us to ensure that proper opportunities are available, and that aspirations remain high.

Notes

¹ "Where Jobs Will (and Won't) Be in the 80's." The New York Times, October 14, 1979, Section 12, p. 9.

² Survey Report, "The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1979," Dr. Alexander W. Astin, University of California, Los Angeles 90024.